

# Consensus reached on Wellesley High School Project

By Katherine L. Babson/guest columnist

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After months (and years) of study, we on the School Building Committee are pleased to announce that we have reached consensus with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) on the Wellesley High School Building Project scope and direction.

Last week, we voted unanimously to approve the project outlined below. The final project scope was developed in collaboration with the MSBA. Such collaboration has been integral to our efforts. We have worked to maximize state reimbursement and to deliver a project plan that is both fiscally responsible and educationally appropriate for Wellesley. The anticipated state contribution for this project will be \$40 million to \$44 million.

## **Rapid progress**

Over the past six weeks, the pace of decision-making increased dramatically as we entered into detailed discussions with the MSBA and State Treasurer Timothy Cahill. It is precisely because we anticipated rapid summer decisions by MSBA that our proactive, exhaustive studies and earlier spring outreach to the community placed us in a knowledgeable position to respond quickly.

At one point, the MSBA suggested we focus on a revised renovation/addition plan of their design. Since we had spent considerable time on a review of multiple reno/add options previously, we were able to promptly review the suggestion with the MSBA and provide detailed analyses. The MSBA and Treasurer Cahill were very receptive to the information and understood the challenges posed by the renovation/addition proposal. Very recently, the MSBA has developed the concept of a “model-school” as a template for new Massachusetts high schools. Our existing assessments of the site constraints and comprehensive educational program review enabled us to promptly evaluate the proposed model-school concept. The conclusion was for us to incorporate the cost saving strategies used in the Whitman Hanson Regional High School, though not the exact design. The MSBA has been very open to our input and we have made every effort to address questions and concerns with analysis and rationale for decisions. The resulting project scope and direction reflects this collaboration and all parties are satisfied with the results.

## **Project scope and direction**

The final project scope is a 280,000 square foot all-new construction building, constructed in one phase, under the following parameters:

- The construction and design costs (including one year of escalation) are not to exceed \$110 million;
- Not included in this amount is the town funding required for enrollment and mitigation items (modulars, parking, safety), the purchase of the Seaver Street properties and additional escalation costs, as these costs are never eligible for reimbursement;
- We also have the option to add \$1.5 million for green elements that are primarily educational in nature, paid for by the Town.
- Lastly, private funds may be raised for additional items as long as they do not increase the footprint or volume of the building.

### **Difference from the ‘Hub’**

The major difference between this project and the Hub is the square footage and resulting cost: 280,000 square feet versus the Hub at 327,000 square feet. The reduction in square footage was a critical point of review in our discussions with the MSBA. We have consistently balanced the Wellesley Educational Program with cost containment. This case proved no different: The new scope enables us to maximize value, maximize reimbursement and enable the program.

The School Committee and the WPS Administration have reviewed the Education Specification (the size and layout of spaces in the building) and identified how best to accommodate the program (curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curricular activities) in the prescribed square footage. The decisions to reduce space were difficult.

Is the resulting Educational Specification what we had initially hoped it would be? No. Are the reductions worth \$40 - \$44 million in state reimbursement? Absolutely.

### **Next steps**

The rapid progress will continue! We will be working with the MSBA to develop detailed designs, cost estimates and construction plans. At every point, we will request public input and discussion. We are targeting mid-October to bring a project request to a Special Town Meeting for approval. Pending approval, we plan to bring the question before the voters of Wellesley in early December. Ultimate success of the project depends on public participation. We appreciate the consistent focus the Constituent Groups and so many others have provided throughout this long process and thank the many who attend the meetings over that last two weeks. We have provided electronic updates and meeting notification so that those who are out-of-town can keep abreast and provide input. To have slowed or halted the process this summer would have been fiscally irresponsible, as opportunities with the MSBA have been time-sensitive and costs continue to rise. We appreciate your patience and your support as we have pursued this project unceasingly.

### **Many thanks**

In this vein, it is with much appreciation that we applaud the efforts of SBC member Tom Goemaat, State Rep. Alice Peisch and the MSBA:

Tom Goemaat worked diligently with the MSBA through many rounds of discussions, requests and decisions. His expertise as the CEO of a major construction company and his practical can-do approach earned him the respect and confidence needed to reach consensus. We continue to be very fortunate that he has been willing to dedicate such significant time and energy to this project for so long. Under Rep. Peisch's active leadership, discussion and decisions with the MSBA were constructive and collaborative. Her remarkable efforts have maximized reimbursement for our town and enabled a high school facility to be built that will serve Wellesley well into the next century.

Finally, we offer many thanks to Treasurer Cahill and MSBA Director Katherine Craven as they were receptive to our analyses and conclusions and enabled a productive collaboration. There are many, many others to thank and that time will come soon. Right now though, we have a significant amount of work ahead of us and we look forward to sharing the progress with you and continue to want to obtain feedback from you.

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